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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 005631

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SUBJECT: DUMA ELECTION: VOTER TURNOUT HIGH, PARTIES ALLEGE  
VIOLATIONS AS VOTING CONTINUES

11. (SBU) Summary: Eighteen regions of Russia have completed voting and all signs are that voter turnout for the December 2 Duma elections is expected to exceed 2003's turnout of 55.75 percent although three hours remain before polls close across all of Russia. The opposition SPS, Yabloko, and Communist parties are alleging widespread election irregularities, similar to those reported in 2003 by OSCE. The chief source of new concern for all observers -Communist Party, the NGO Golos, SPS, and others-is the more widespread use of absentee ballots. Russian-national Embassy voters reported an orderly process at their polling places in Moscow and Moscow region. A CEC tour of a number of polling places, unsurprisingly, showed the same. The U.S.-funded domestic election observers were largely unimpeded. Their observations and those of much smaller international observer missions, will frame results, expected late evening December 2 or early a.m. December 3. End summary.

Turnout  
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12. (SBU) If current trends hold, it should be high. The CEC is reporting 42.4 percent as of 1600 local time and is predicting that it will exceed 60 percent, about the 55.75 percent recorded in 2003, but less than the 70 percent gunned for by United Russia supporters. Ekho Moskv reported that as of 1500 local turnout is two times higher then it was at the same time in 2003. Sample comparative turnout as of mid-afternoon for the following regions suggests that turnout should be higher:

-- Amur: 44.6 percent (today), 32.5 percent (2003)  
-- Khabarovsk region: 39.5 percent (today), 27.3 percent (2003)  
-- Chita region: 37.46 percent (today), 27.2 percent (2003)  
-- Sakhalin region: 37.14 percent (today), 33.6 percent (2003)  
-- Primorsk region: 35.27 percent (today), 25.7 percent (2003)  
-- Irkutsk region: 24.9 percent (today), 21.7 percent (2003)

Kamchatka and Chutkotka are closed and the Chukotka regional election commission reports 76.7 percent, while Kamchatka reports 53.74 percent turnout.

Opposition and Violations  
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13. (SBU) By all accounts, the voting has been going smoothly, but there are alleged irregularities. NGO Golos reports that it has received about four thousand calls alleging violations on its hotline. Opposition parties -SPS, the Communist Party, and Yabloko-are alleging violations around the country. The nature of the violations are similar with those seen in the 2003 Duma elections: ballot box stuffing in Dagestan, difficulties with some party and NGO Golos observers being admitted to polling places at scattered locations throughout the country, allegations that some voters have taken their ballots from the polling place in order presumably to complete them under the supervision of a party or administrative authority. There have been cases where voters have phone-photoed their ballots, presumably to show their employers or

others whom they voted for, but these appear to be isolated instances. In some cases polling places are holding "vote lotteries" and offering prizes, following a drawing, for those who vote.

14. (SBU) Other Russia's Gary Kasparov and Eduard Limonov invalidated their ballots, writing "Other Russia" on them before depositing them in the ballot box, in order to show their dissatisfaction with the options available. SPS's Leonid Gozman complained of measures used by United Russia to increase its returns, and argued that a Duma elected in an election characterized by widespread violations cannot be legitimate. He suggested that an elections "black book" be created.

15. (SBU) One new issue of concern with this election is absentee ballots. About 700 thousand ballots were issued for the 2003 election. Embassy has not been able to determine how many have been provided this time around, but the NGO Golos alleges, based on fragmentary information, that the numbers are exponentially higher. Per Golos, they are ten times higher in Moscow, thirteen times higher in St. Petersburg, 28 times higher in Chuvashiya, and 54 times more numerous in Komi. The CEC-affiliated Russian Foundation for Free Elections Chairman Andrey Przhedomskiy scored absentee ballots as a worry in a press conference he gave on November 30. The Communist Party has told us that Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov will highlight absentee ballots as its main area of concern at a press conference scheduled for about 1800 local time, today.

#### Atmosphere

16. (SBU) Russians with whom we have spoken report that voting has been orderly, their polling places had observers from political parties, there was no campaigning around or in the polling places.

MOSCOW 00005631 002 OF 003

One individual who voted in Moscow region observed much higher than usual voter turnout. It appeared to her that the voting lists had been updated. (Her father had died since the election, and his name was not on the list.) The majority of voters observed were pensioners. There are polling places in all of Moscow's railroad stations. A quick survey showed they are all clearly marked, guarded by police, and there did not seem to be a large number of people using them.

#### Voter Awareness

17. (SBU) It seems that everyone in the country was notified by SMS on December 1 of the elections. Subways and surface public transportation in Moscow have recordings reminding all to vote on December 2. They are many new signs around Moscow reminding all of the elections.

#### Moscow Oblast: An Official Snapshot

18. (SBU) On a tour organized by the Central Election Commission, approximately 50 Moscow-based diplomats and bilateral international observers were briefed on "combat day" by Moscow Election Commission Chairwoman Valentine Simonov, as well as given a tour of several polling stations in the Balashikha district of the Moscow region. Smirnova explained that Moscow encompassed 3,325 polling stations, reporting to 72 territorial commissions. The number of registered voters was approximately 5.45 million, and 140,000 absentee ballots had been requested. In addition to electoral reforms that made these the first party-list only elections and removed the "against all" option on the ballot, Smirnova noted new requirements to facilitate access for disabled voters, with Moscow making 40 polling stations wheelchair accessible and printing Braille electoral pamphlets for the seeing impaired. Separate arrangements were made to bring mobile ballot boxes to the homebound and those in hospitals, with the voters' names recorded on separate lists.

19. (SBU) Visits to three electoral stations in Balashikha, out of

the 75 that serve the region's 167,000 residents, provided a snap-shot of what we assume are model polling stations. The sites, as most polling stations in Russia, were located in schools, protected by the police, and run with cheerful efficiency by a mostly female staff. Each of the polling stations had lists of approximately 2,500 registered voters; as the steady stream of voters entered, they were directed to tables on the basis of their city address and had their identification verified and ballot issued. We were shown lists of registered official party observers (one station had six, another five), and were able to speak with the one United Russia poll monitor then on site. There were no obvious violations: no political "agitation" material was in evidence within 50 meters of the polling stations, and the school walls were devoid of pictures. We observed that electoral norms often broke down during the actual vote: spouses huddled over ballots together, babushkas dragooned passersby into providing additional assistance and frequently conferred with their neighbors before casting their ballot. Local employees reported similar voting conditions at their polling stations in Moscow: efficiently run, well attended, with security in force.

¶10. (SBU) Although the tour took place early on voting morning, election officials were optimistic of a high voter turnout. Smirnova said that, in contrast to 2003, some polling sites were confronted with lines when they opened at 8 a.m. In Moscow's Balashikha region -- which is a densely populated residential area -- officials were predicting up to a 70 percent turnout (compared to 2003's average of 55 percent). While voter participation averaged 17 percent at noon, one of the 75 polling stations had already scored an impressive 44 percent turnout. When asked to describe the discrepancy, the local election commissioner noted that the station was located near a military facility "and our service men take their duty to vote seriously." A disproportionate number of voters were elderly, but there were plenty of families in evidence, with children brought along to observe the process. Driving past some electoral stations we saw signs of organized entertainment (dance groups and children's choirs), with the Balashikha Election Commission Chairwoman noting that in other areas of town youth groups were handing out tickets to discotheques as a reward for youthful voters showing up.

Comment  
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¶11. (SBU) As was noted in the ODIHR report on the 2003 Duma contest, there no doubt have been irregularities today, but the chief problem with these elections has been the conduct of the election campaign, where administrative resources, access to the media, campaign finance flows, and pressure on opposition parties combined to give United Russia an overwhelming advantage. The problems alleged today

MOSCOW 00005631 003 OF 003

are insignificant in comparison. On a positive note, U.S.-funded domestic election observers appear to have operated freely, without official interference. Their conclusions, and those of the far fewer international observers, will help frame the results which should be known by late tonight or early morning December 3.  
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